

# Casket retailers attacking

By MICHAEL A. ROBINSON  
For The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — For James Hopkins, the decision to open one of Oakland's most unusual stores began with the funeral for a friend.

After a 23-year-old friend from Fresno died in a car crash last year, Hopkins organized an effort to help the cash-strapped family cope with the high cost of a burial.

Hopkins saved the family \$800 by finding a beneficent manufacturer willing to sell a casket at cost.

With thousands of Californians dying each day, and not all of them rich people, he figured there had to be a big market for caskets sold at a discount.

The result is the Casket Outlet on Grand Avenue, thought to be the only store of its kind in the East Bay but one Hopkins and other observers say is part of an emerging trend in the nation's funeral industry.

"We are trying to improve the funeral process," says Hopkins, a former fashion designer who hopes to open three more Casket Outlets in the Bay Area in the next year.

"For many funerals, the casket represents 40 percent of the cost. People need to know they have options that will save them money."

Sandwiched between a children's bookstore and a dry cleaning shop, the Casket Outlet displays a wide range of choices. The store has 23 caskets available for viewing, from a basic cloth-covered wood box that sells for \$399 to a bronze model costing \$4,800, about half the price at a funeral home.

Hopkins says business is good even though he has to put up with a lot of funeral jokes that border on being tasteless. The store sold one casket before its official opening Nov. 9 and has sold four more since then. Hopkins says.

And Casket outlet is drawing a

wide range of visitors, from competing funeral directors to curiosity seekers.

"We're getting about 20 people a day," he says. "They are just stunned by what they see."

But whether low prices, a dignified atmosphere and strong novelty appeal will make the Casket Outlet a sales success is difficult to determine, industry experts say.

Retail casket stores opened in the past in various regions of the country and generally met with failure. But two years ago, the

industry's dynamics changed substantially when the Federal Trade Commission ruled funeral directors could no longer charge consumers a handling fee for caskets purchased out-

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side the mortuary.

Supporters say the handling fee was common practice because funeral directors needed to defray the cost of insurance and to protect themselves against potential legal liability should the casket prove defective.

But the Federal Trade Commission ruled the policy restricted competition, increasing the cost of funerals.

Now, the casket business is wide open.

Nevertheless, observers estimated fewer than 20 such stores exist nationwide. In the Bay Area, Casket Outlet has two other Bay Area locations, one in San Francisco, and the other in San Jose.

Mark Panciera, a third-generation funeral director in Hollywood, Fla., believes discount retailers can survive but says they face strong built-in limitations.

A spokesman for the National Funeral Directors Association, a Washington, D.C., trade group, Panciera says most family mem-



James Hopkins, left, and Keith Cray in the showroom of The Casket Outlet in their Oakland, Calif., business. The

bers have such a difficult time coping with death they can't bear to shop for a casket.

"The casket is a very important component but it is just one component in the grief cycle," says Panciera, president of Panciera Funeral Homes. Shopping around "may make economic sense but in the long run does it make emotional sense?"

Panciera says discounters may do well in California because the state leads the nation in many trends, including those involving funerals.

For instance, the funeral indus-



# ng high cost of funerals



AP Photo

ford sit  
Outlet,  
two are

hoping to give consumers an alternative to more expensive caskets sold at funeral homes. The retail outlet sells its caskets at

a discount price. The store has 23 caskets available for viewing, from a basic wood box for \$399 to a \$48,000 bronze model.

try was buffeted by the move toward cremations that began in California about 25 years ago.

But Panciera and other industry insiders note many cremations include traditional funeral services that require a casket. They say consumers naturally turn to an experienced funeral director to help them make important decisions regarding a loved one's final tribute.

Furthermore, says Steve Estrada, prearrangement counselor at Santos Robinson Mortuary in San Leandro, funeral directors are on call 24 hours a day

They will go to the family's home in the middle of the night to pick up the body, help with the complex paperwork for death benefits and handle the death certificate.

In addition, a funeral home must have a licensed director on staff who has spent at least a year studying mortuary science. Funeral homes devote 75 to 90 hours for a typical service and make back some of that cost on the casket, Estrada says.

"The whole idea behind a funeral in the first place is to have a healthy grieving process."

Estrada says.

"You aren't going to get that at a casket store."

Hopkins disagrees. He says he and partner Keith Crawford, a former Sears Roebuck & Co. manager, have spent the last year studying the industry and will provide plenty of extra services after making the sale.

"We are the wave of the future," Hopkins says.

"We're not just selling caskets. We're providing a service. People need help planning a funeral. We know that from experience."